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ABSTRACT

The interview process provides students with a contextual framework for writing essays (reports, profiles, and arguments), because it helps them to identify and develop their own conceptual and investigative skills through dialogue with another person. Before the actual interview, it is important to choose a subject to interview, form a sense of which questions to ask, make an interview appointment, determine what method will be used to record information, and prepare a list of questions that probe the significant facts and ideas needed to create the final essay. Other guidelines for the interview vary according to the type of essay assignment. In preparing a report, it is necessary to define the basic objectives and organization of the report, state the major problems and events, and give the reader a clear idea of the major divisions of the subject. A profile focuses on the person, uses a narrative structure, establishes immediacy, and introduces readers to the scene and leads them out at the end. The argument or persuasive paper presents a dialectical interchange between the interviewer and the person interviewed and formulates questions in such a way as to sort out those elements that constitute the answer. (HAI)

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INTERVIEWS AND THE PROCESS OF INQUIRY

"Go talk to Jones, he knows all about this" -- and we do talk to Jones, and shortly we know something about it too. Whether they are informal exchanges like this one, or extended sessions involving prepared questions and tape recorders, interviews remain one of the easiest ways of discovering and transferring complex information. As a method of inquiry, the interview has been the primary mainstay of newspaper reporters, television personalities, magazine writers, and lately a few successful authors like Truman Capote and Studs Terkel. Thus it would seem that for writing classes, where the research barrier looms so formidably, the interview might offer itself as a window to the world, a bridge between forced research and the quick swirl of professional writing where time is money and you go straight to the horse's mouth to get your story.

As a matter of fact, interviews have built-in advantages for teaching writing. To begin with, most classes will respond to a people-centered activity like interviewing. Even if there is really no substitute for a careful search of the appropriate printed sources, students work better if they have already engaged the problem outside the world of books; they associate the subject with the persons they interview, and so they tend to regard it as "something they can relate to." From our point of view as teachers, the interview has the advantage of drawing out the conceptual, social and investigative skills that students bring to the classroom as part of their normal development. Like the exercise of journal writing, the interview encourages students to write "from the inside out," putting to work their own strengths instead of pasting in lines of cliches that sound to them like academic writing. The stimulation of asking questions

and getting to know the persons interviewed generally brings into play their natural curiosity as well as their common sense and ability to judge the value of what they hear. Once engaged in the process of interviewing, they begin to develop that important sense of what the real issues are, and which materials they need to complete a particular writing assignment.

I

The basic procedures for conducting an interview are not difficult, but since most students lack this experience, it pays to devote some class time to a discussion of the practical details. Probably the most important step is the first one--preparing for the interview--which involves limiting the subject (narrowing the focus) and then gathering enough information that one knows which persons to interview, and can form a sense of which questions to ask. A few students are bound to object that such a preparation merely duplicates the investigation accomplished by the interview itself, but that isn't exactly true. To begin with, there is no research project that does not progress in stages; laying out a basic research plan is a necessary orientation for asking the right questions later on. Furthermore, all the interviewer needs at this point is a general background knowledge of the subject. Before interviewing a business executive, for example, it helps to know something of the company's history, its reputation in the community, and how its products have been selling. In this case, a selection of articles turned up by scanning the newspaper idexes should contain the information needed for making up appropriate questions.

Setting up the interview, or the matter of appointments may also be worth discussing. Generally, one can get better and longer interviews

by calling ahead, and an appointment is usually necessary for interviewing persons in official positions. Some students don't need advice about making appointments, of course, but most of them do need to discuss methods of recording information during the interview. Here, the teacher can stress the obvious--that the main thing is to record as much as possible about the major topics, using a system of key terms and some sort of outline instead of trying to write down the entire content of the interview. But if the conversation moves too quickly, or if for some other reason the student has difficulty taking notes, it is then an absolute necessity to sit down directly after the interview and write out the important parts before they are forgotten. Another question is whether to use a tape recorder. Students may not realize how hard it is to work from a tape when writing up an interview, and they probably aren't familiar with the agonies of transcribing a tape. But since taping the session is probably the best method for getting extended quotes, the class may wish to discuss ways of using the recorder without irritating the person interviewed, and of indexing the recordings so that the important parts of the interview will be easier to locate during the process of writing the essay.

A final preparation is the sheet of questions--neatly typed out, if possible--which can be a quick source of ideas when the conversation falters, but is most important as a guide for the interviewer's investigation, and as an analytic tool for exploring the subject. These questions, along with others which arise spontaneously during the interview, make interviewing a process of inquiry, a method of probing for the significant facts and ideas that create the finished essay. The quality of the interview, and of the resulting essay, depends upon whether or not the interviewer's questions cover the subject adequately and are sufficiently penetrating.

Indeed, as a method of inquiry, the interview is central to the composing process. It constitutes what some would call "pre-writing," and others, "an aid to invention." Equally important, the interview process can be used as a foundation for developing a linked series of essay assignments--for instance, a report, a profile and a persuasive essay--so that even though students carry out the same basic interview process for all three projects, each successive paper also requires the exercise of some new skills, including an increasing amount of interpretive analysis. Writing a report, in other words, involves the collecting and ordering of materials to give a clear picture of a subject. Since reports are intended mainly to inform the reader, this sort of inquiry aims at identifying key patterns in the subject and elaborating on the relevant details. In writing a profile, one tries to convey a sense of personality while describing the more important aspects of a person's occupation and experience. The best profiles go beyond mere reporting to suggest the individuality of a person's character as it shapes and is reflected by the events of his or her life. But the argument is the most demanding exercise, since it requires a greater degree of preparation; the students must analyze the problematic situation, derive a solution, and verify whether or not it is valid before proceeding to construct the argument itself.

By showing students how to use interviews as preparations for writing the report, the profile and the argument, teachers reemphasize the importance of the process of inquiry. Yet as students will point out, inquiries differ with the subject, and each essay requires a slightly different line of questioning. It is therefore helpful to provide the students with

guides for making up sets of leading (or "heuristic") questions that are appropriate for particular kinds of essays. The three sets of questions described in the following sections are specialized, and therefore limited in scope; as such, they are not meant to take the place of formal heuristics like those designed by Kenneth Burke or by Young, Becker, and Pike, but they do have the advantage of being more closely adapted to a student's goals for a particular essay. By employing these questions, students gain an idea of which materials to look for, how to discover them in the process of interviewing, and to some extent, how to arrange them so as to achieve the effect proper to that type of essay.

II

The foremost objective in writing a report is to give the reader a clear idea of the major divisions of the subject--the basic organization, the major problems, the causes, the effects, or simply the main events that occurred. The interviewer's first task is therefore to discover this basic structure, and one can begin by inquiring about the person's relationship to the subject; asking "Where do you fit in?" usually leads to a discussion of basic organization. On the other hand, it is possible simply to ask for an analysis, since the average person is well accustomed to explaining "the big picture" and "how it breaks down." For example, a student inquiring about current problems in the juvenile courts soon learned that juvenile offenders fall into three basic categories: "children who have emotional or psychiatric problems; those who are normal but come from an abnormal home environment; and those who simply seem to lack values, responsibility and self-control" (Dana Decker). Once these categories were established, the paper fell into place as she proceeded to

describe the two fundamental "solutions" for each type of case and the problems encountered in such attempts.

When the major divisions of the subject are established, the interviewer looks for illustrative detail--preferably that with some color and life in it--and one good source is the person's occupation, his or her particular job or main activity. For example, what are the methods peculiar to that job? How much experience is required for the job, and how much of it does this person have? These questions can initiate a conversation about problems encountered in relation to the subject--a useful discussion, since a description of typical problems may give the truest picture of the subject. When the girl writing about the juvenile courts interviewed a local probation officer, for instance, she found that psychiatric therapy for juveniles was limited to one hour per week--not even enough time to overcome the child's distrust, let alone provide any real assistance. Another way to help the person contribute relevant detail is to encourage anedcotes: "Were there any times when . . .?" These informal stories are extremely useful because they create their own context and interior organization. Often the writer can insert an anecdote directly into the text of the report, where it serves the dual purpose of entertaining the reader while describing representative situations like the arrest procedures leading to trial in the juvenile courts.

Along with gathering information for the report goes the need for coherence. How, in other words, can the writer link all this material together so the reader can assimilate it easily? Ideas for creating coherence generally occur in the process of assembling the data or after the interviews are completed and there is time to spread everything out

and take stock. Still, a student should have at least a few ideas in mind from the beginning, since these potential "shapes" for the report may help to decide which materials to include and how to arrange them in order. The following is a handlist of questions which suggest ways of shaping the report and giving it a coherent organization. These questions can also be used during the interview itself, either as written here or in a suitably modified form.

1. What is the setting? The pervasive atmosphere? What are the constants?
2. What is the history of the subject?
3. Can the subject be described as a process?
4. Is there a rank order for enumerating the major divisions?
5. What are the analogies to other subjects familiar to the reader?
6. How can the subject be evaluated with reference to values shared by the reader?

The value of a "setting" or any other constant or typical condition is that the writer can use it as a common referent or theme for the various materials in the report. For example, the girl who researched the juvenile courts decided that the central flaw beneath all the confusion of these proceedings was apathy: "No one seems to know, or even care to answer these questions." Appearing at the end of the paper, this summary statement gave her discussion an added retrospective unity.

Sometimes a subject is easiest to explain as a history or as a process. Indeed some writers make habitual use of these devices because a simple, natural, chronological sequence reduces the difficulties of writing transitions and maintaining continuity. But even if the schemes of history or process are not used for structuring an essay, they are still useful

as inventional concepts; they provide the writer with a way of developing his or her ideas about a new subject, and they give the person interviewed a framework within which to explain complex situations. Like any other inventional devices, the concepts of history and process are bridges for communicating information, but few such bridges are as common to everyday conversation, or as effortless. "How did this problem get started?" and "How do you process a juvenile offender?" are two of the many ways our student researcher could have used these devices.

Ranking the divisions of the subject in order of importance is an obvious idea, but still a good source of questions. "What is the toughest problem you have?" can be a way into a discussion--or into a report. Less obvious, perhaps, are the attempts to analyze the subject by means of analogies, or to evaluate the subject with reference to values shared by the reader. The analogy has the virtue of appealing to the reader's imagination; like other metaphors, it tends to be visually oriented, sometimes vivid, and can accomplish a great deal in short space. For example, the report on juvenile courts begins with this quick contrast: "Amidst a growing furor over administration of justice for juveniles, the image of a kindly white-haired judge placing his arm around the wayward boy and leading him back to the right path is fading." Notice that this brief image also appeals to the reader's sense of values. Most of us do like to think of judges as kindly and white-haired--even if we know things just aren't that simple--and being told that child offenders receive harsh or careless treatment disturbs us. The writer has made a bridge to our social values, in other words, and we are more likely to read carefully thereafter. We have, of course, been considering the effect of such devices as they appear in the final written report. It is necessary to

remember that vivid analogies like the white-haired judge are also useful before and during the interview, when the interviewer is trying to provoke, discover and organize new facts and ideas in the give-and-take process of asking questions and building on the answers.

III

The interview process is especially helpful in writing a profile because much of the essay is simply a record of what was said. Unlike the straight question-and-answer piece, however, the profile focusses directly on the person interviewed, in an attempt to project a three-dimensional view of his or her character and life experience. Here, the writer's primary concern is to establish immediacy, to create the illusion that the reader is looking over the interviewer's shoulder, listening to the person talk. Writing a profile, then, is something like writing a narrative: one has to provide a setting, describe the interaction between the two people and devise ways of introducing the readers into this scene at the beginning and leading them out of it at the end. Building on this narrative structure, the writer makes an occasional observation about the person's gestures and characteristic phrases, trying to sustain a sense of the person's "realness." One student who interviewed a man from Wichita's skid row began by describing his own embarrassment and apprehension as he toured the Douglas Street alleys and bars, looking for a subject (Gerry Robinson). He got his interview outside the Koma Bar, when 72-year-old William Lewis ("People call me Billy") asked him for a cigarette. Since the immediate setting had already been established, the student could move easily into a description of the man ("dirty gray hair and beard, red face, fat nose . . . elf-like appearance") and some

of his personality traits ("'Nothin was worth a damn anymore, after my mother died'").

These minor details provide texture, of course, but they can also be used to imply something about the person that isn't conveyed by the dialogue alone. Focussing on significant detail is thus a technique of invention; like the leading questions described in the section on reports, it is a way of discovering avenues of inquiry. But for pursuing such implications, it is once again useful to encourage anecdotes, since these informal accounts are convenient ways of exploring the two areas most important for profiles: the fund of information the person has to contribute regarding his or her job or other experience, and the outlook on life which the person has developed over a period of years. Readers want to learn something by reading a profile, and the "cargo of information" it provides about what the person does is one of the fascinations of this kind of essay. On the other hand, readers also enjoy hearing "what it's like" to lead a certain kind of life; they want to see things through another person's eyes for a while. The student interviewing Billy Lewis began to develop these two lines of investigation by asking questions suggested by the man's appearance: Did he drink only wine? How did he find enough to drink and eat? Where did he sleep in winter? Each of these questions provoked a story that helped to explain how Billy survived on skid row and expressed the philosophy that had convinced him to do so for more than forty years.

A more difficult sort of inquiry is trying to discern the pattern of of development in a person's life or career. In a sense, the meaning of

our experience is defined by the pattern which seems to emerge as we look back on all the good and bad times after a period of years; for if we can distinguish this pattern, the scattered, random-seeming details of our lives acquire weight and significance in terms of it. The interviewer can begin the search for this perspective by inquiring about the person's early life and about his or her plans for the future. If nothing else, these questions lend a certain depth to the profile; but if the writer is perceptive and skillful, the reminiscences and future plans can be made to imply the shaping forces of the person's life. The life of Billy Lewis, for instance, begins in Tulsa, where he successfully ran a clothing store for ten years. Then in 1937 his mother died, and Billy hit the skids: "'Like I said, nothin else was worth a damn.'" He never married ("'The sun has never shined on a woman good enough to marry'"). His view of society: "'I'd like to kill them all--they're all a bunch of crooks.'" His future plans: He would be dead in three years' time ("'This wine kills you, every day you drink it, every time you take a drink'"). His judgment on forty years of skid row life: "'If I had another chance, I'd live it the same way; I wouldn't do anything differently'".

IV

Interviews are always helpful for writing an argument or persuasive paper, if only because interviewing is an efficient method of collecting data, and the best arguments are built on solid research. But it's also true that most good arguments are based on the analysis of a problem, and it is here that the dialectical interchange between interviewer and the person interviewed can be especially productive. At the beginning,

the interviewer works on stating the problem and determining the unknowns: "What needs to be known or done to solve it?" But in order to offer guidance and maintain control of the interview, it might be better to start by asking about the person's relationship to the problem: "How does it affect you?" This question identifies the person's special interests and establishes the limits of his or her knowledge of the situation; also, it leads to questions about what the person considers the sources of tension, inconsistencies, errors and so forth that actually constitute the problem. For example, one student who was investigating the problem of unexcused absences in the Wichita High Schools found that only a small percentage of students missed more than five hours during a nine-week period (Bryon McKee). But these absences were intentional, the reason being that any Kansan can obtain a G.E.D. (General Education Diploma) by examination at the age of seventeen, whereas the average age of high school seniors at graduation is eighteen. After the researcher had interviewed several people, he decided that the problem of absences could be stated as a difference, or mismatch between two persprectives on secondary education: the high school administrators considered it more desirable for students to earn their education by spending four years in the classroom; the students who had been skipping school thought they benefitted more by enjoying their freedom until they were seventeen, when they could get their G.E.D.'s and then get jobs.

Once the problem is stated, however, one still has to formulate the unknowns--the sorts of thing that might constitute the "answer." In other words, it is helpful to formulate a number of standard conceptual

frames (in the form of questions); that way, one is more likely to recognize a promising idea, because it fits the general conception of what is needed.[1] For instance, there are questions of fact: Who or What is needed? And questions of relationship: What values would be confirmed or violated? What would be the causes and effects of such a solution? Does the solution follow logically from the present course of action? Finally, there are questions of policy: in view of the present policy and other such constraints, what should be done?

On the basis of his interviews with the high school absentees, the student decided that a solution would have to take into account their scale of values, which at present was motivating them to skip school. In their view, a good job was the important thing, and the G.E.D. was the fastest and easiest route to getting one. But since neither the students nor the administrators were likely to change their ideas about the value of an education, the researcher formulated the unknowns in a statement something like the following: "What changes could be made so that a student could get a good job quicker and easier by staying in school than by getting a G.E.D.?" His conclusion was that the Kansas legislature should pass a law requiring a student to be twenty years old before qualifying to take the G.E.D.; that way, graduating from high school at eighteen would be the better alternative.

After formulating a potential solution, the interviewer attempts to verify, or test it, and in the process of verification, collects supporting arguments which can be used as part of the essay. In an interview, verifying the solution means finding ways of asking that essential question: "Would it work? Why, or why not?" It is more efficient, however, to

analyze this basic question and approach it gradually through a number of subordinate questions. For example, one can project the results of the solution: "What sort of opposition would it engender? What kind of support? And from whom?" As a final step, it is wise to enlist the person's aid by asking what modifications seem necessary.

An advantage of using the interview process to verify the hypothesis is that another person might find it easier to play the devil's advocate and give the idea a rigorous testing. But of course the interviewer is not limited to asking one other person. It is advisable, in fact, to test the solution on two or more people, taking advantage of their combined knowledge and noting any significant differences in their opinions. The freshman researching unexcused absences asked the students whether waiting until they were twenty to get the G.E.D. would affect them. They said it would mean at least two additional years without a job, or at best with a very low paying job. Another unpleasant idea was the possibility of "rejection from the mainstream of society," as they put it. Given the passage of such a law, their attitude toward attending school seemed likely to change. On the other hand, when the student questioned school administrators, they objected that the real problem was not in the law, but in the child's social development and in the child's family life. At this point, the student determined that even though his trial solution was in some ways a good one, it was not an answer to what he considered the real problem, which was as yet unstated; he then proceeded to reformulate the problem as a conflict between the way the school administrators explained the absentees' behavior, and what he thought were the immediate and effective reasons for the unexcused absences.

For this student, as for all of us, the effort of inquiry was repeatable, a cyclical process that did not end until he derived a solution that seemed workable, given the results of his attempts to verify it. The difference from most inquiries was that he pursued his investigation through the medium of several interviews, which probably shortened his task to some extent while providing him with information he could not obtain elsewhere. Ultimately, however, the "interview process" does not represent a new method of inquiry; rather, it provides a frame for the process of inquiry that helps students to mobilize previously acquired skills and to coordinate inventional devices like the topical questions taught in most writing classes. In short, the interview process creates a tangible context within which students can apply techniques of invention as they carry out the process of inquiry in preparing to compose a variety of essays.

NOTES

[1]In writing this section on stating the unknowns I have made grateful use of the discussion of problem solving in Richard Young, Alton Becker and Kenneth Pike's Rhetoric: Discovery and Change (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1970), pp. 94-6.